

**From:** Ruth Vanita [<mailto:ruthvanita@gmail.com>]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, May 11, 2016 11:21 AM  
**To:** HSSframework  
**Subject:** India/South Asia/Hinduism debate in text books

Dear Instructional Quality Commission,

I teach India-related courses (among other courses) at the University of Montana, and am one of the founders of South & South-East Asian Studies there. [1] I am writing with regard to a couple of issues in the current debate around text books. The term “South Asia,” coined in the US during the Cold War era, is appropriate for the study of a group of nations in the twentieth century. However, I begin all my classes on India with the statement that India is a young nation but an old civilization. To refer to ancient and medieval India as “South Asia” is inaccurate, since people living at various times before the twentieth century referred to Ἰνδία (India) in ancient Greek, India in Latin and English, or Hind in several languages, but not as South Asia.

Alexander the Great set out to conquer “India,” not South Asia. Shakespeare, to take just one example from many English writers, refers to India many times, as a land of fabulous wealth and sunshine. His Helena, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, refers to the “Indian” who worships the sun; in *Troilus and Cressida*, Pandarus declares his readiness to walk “barefoot to India”; and, most importantly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio refers to Antonio’s trading ships: “What, not one hit?/ From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England,/ From Lisbon, Barbary, and India?” Note that here “India,” as a unit, is placed on the same level as “England.” Neither Shakespeare nor anyone in his time would have understood “South Asia,” but most people had heard of “India.” The European colonial powers all referred to India (and to other units, such as Ceylon) but not to South Asia.

Anyone who doubts that Indians had a sense of their own identity, should read Diana Eck’s meticulously researched and brilliant book, *India: A Sacred Geography* (Harmony Books, 2012), which traces how pilgrimage routes from ancient times and even today, along with the stories told along those routes, constructed for Indians a sense both of geographical and of civilizational unity.

To replace “India” with “South Asia” and simultaneously replace “Hinduism” with “ancient Indian religion” is to create confusion worse confounded. If “India” did not exist until 1947, how could an “ancient Indian religion” exist? If we are to nitpick over words, we may as well say that since the word “religion” has no Indian-language equivalent, we should not refer to ancient Indian religion or to Buddhism or Jainism.

Many highly educated scholars (not to mention millions of less scholarly Indians) and many professors of South Asian studies, like myself, do not accept the new theory that the Hindu religion or Hinduism is a colonial invention. As Diana Eck's book, among many others, shows, and as daily experience attests, Hindus still worship many of the same Gods, Goddesses, sacred animals and plants that were worshiped two millennia ago, still recite Vedic mantras at home and in temples, tell many of the same stories, and perform daily worship (*puja*) in ways described in ancient texts like the Gita, offering leaves, fruit, flowers and water with devotion to a chosen deity (*ishtadeva*). Words and names change but the practice displays continuity along with discontinuities. Christian practice has changed drastically too; St Augustine recounts how Christians went from one church to another, taking communion at each. His mother, St. Monica, a devout Christian, would probably not recognize Christian worship in an American Unitarian church today. But no one questions that Christianity is the appropriate term for both types of practice.

I suggest the following:

- (1) A statement be added to all text books, explaining that the term South Asia was coined in the twentieth century to refer to a number of countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives and possibly Afghanistan, Tibet and Myanmar.
- (2) If a phenomenon in earlier times can clearly be established as having occurred in regions that now fall under the sovereignty of another country, a sentence be added in parentheses, for example "the weaving industry in Bengal (this region now comprises West Bengal in India and modern Bangladesh)." If it cannot be clearly determined in exactly which region the phenomenon occurred, the reference should simply be to "India," not to "South Asia," for example, "Ancient India experienced a Vedic period named for the Vedas which were composed in Sanskrit," not (as in the proposed change), "Ancient South Asia experienced a Vedic period named for the Vedas which were composed in Sanskrit."
- (3) References in a single sentence be consistent, for example, the phrase now in the textbooks is consistent: "Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and India." The proposed change to: "Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and Indus Valley..." introduces inconsistency. To be consistent, it would have to be changed to: "Tigris and Euphrates valleys, Nile valley, Hueng He valley and Indus Valley..." This is an unnecessary change. The existing sentence works well.

Dr. Ruth Vanita